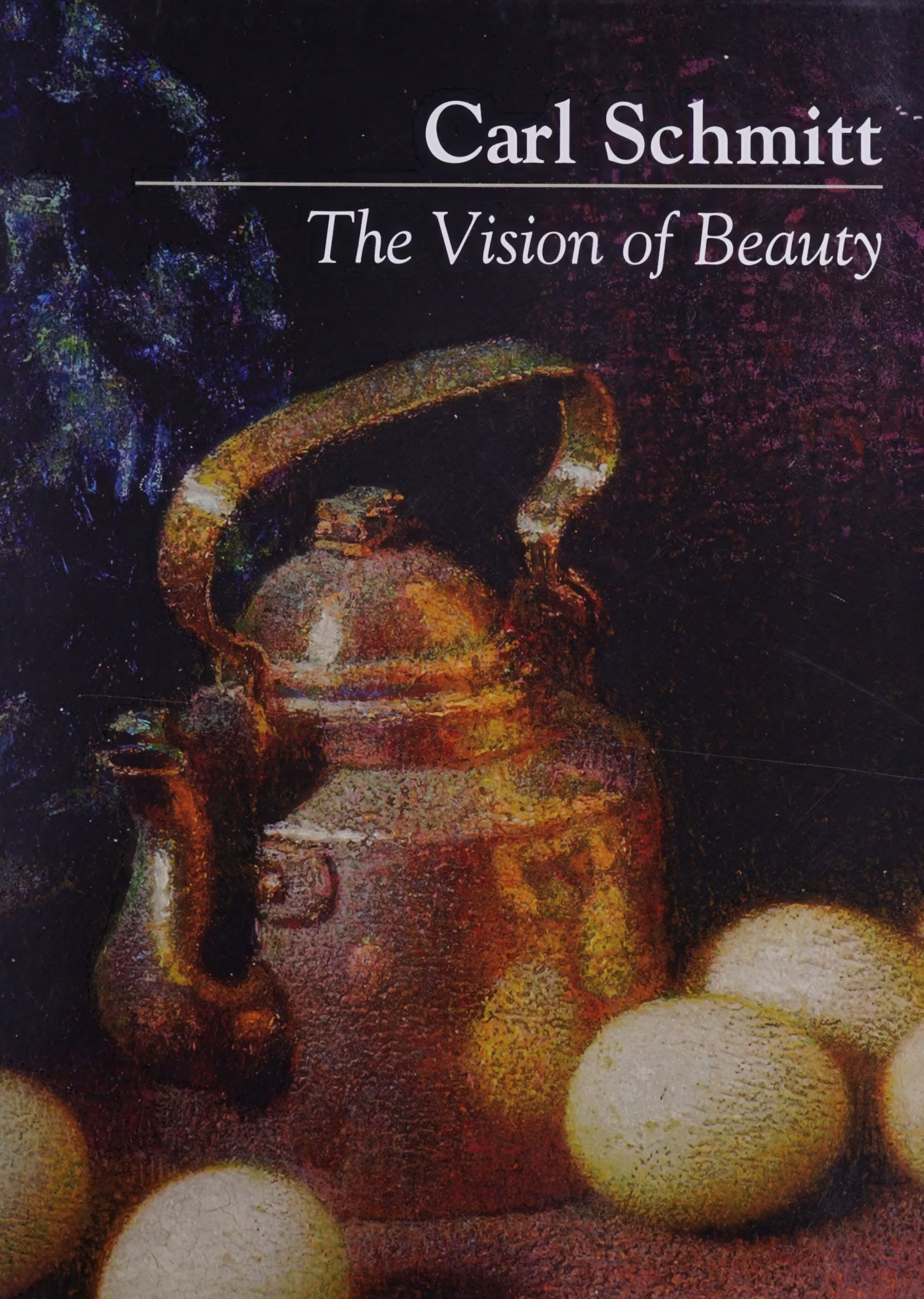
Carl Schmitt

The Vision of Beauty



CARL SCHMITT *The Vision of Beauty*

Carl Schmitt

The Vision of Beauty

Samuel A. Schmitt

THE CARL SCHMITT FOUNDATION *Wilton, Connecticut*

in association with

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FRONTISPIECE: Carl Schmitt, *Portrait Study (Self-Portrait)*, detail, 1915

In memory of my father, John S. Schmitt (1927–2012),
Carl Schmitt's seventh son.
—Samuel A. Schmitt

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Foreword

Whenever I would offer my father an explanation of one of his paintings, he would invariably respond, "Don't make silly theories. Just look at it!" He meant, of course, to look again, to let your gaze linger and perhaps see a little deeper, to *experience* it. As he himself said, "I think pictures are meant to be looked at. If there is a secret—the eye must comprehend it."

And that is the aim of this book: to present some outstanding examples of the work of Carl Schmitt so that they can just be looked at and enjoyed.

The quotations which accompany each painting are intended to aid in this enjoyment. To be sure, when looking at a painting, it always helps to know something of the thinking and aims of the artist, and though Schmitt rarely spoke or wrote about specific paintings, his notebooks contain a wealth of insights into the thought and vision that went into his art. In assembling the paintings for this book, Sam Schmitt has drawn some aptly chosen quotations from those writings to introduce the reader to the mind and spirit that permeates Schmitt's work as a whole. Together with the more extensive selections included at the end of the book, they even serve as a kind of introduction to Carl Schmitt himself.

This book is offered, then, as a way to extend to others the appreciation and enjoyment of the art of Carl Schmitt and to help perpetuate the vision of reality that informed it—which indeed is the aim of the Carl Schmitt Foundation.

I would like to express our special gratitude to Mr. Sean Fieler and the Chiaroscuro Foundation without whose generous support and encouragement this book would not have been possible. Thanks are also due to the many who have generously given their support, especially Mr. and Mrs. Joe Duffy, Mr. and Mrs. George Sim Johnston, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph C. Lane, Mr. Brian McAuliffe, Mr. and Mrs. Gerard Mitchell, Katharine and Herbert Philbrook, Mr. and Mrs. John S. Schmitt, Mr. E. Lisk Wyckoff, Jr., and the Homeland Foundation, and two of our Trustees, Mr. Jacob A. Schmitt and Mr. and Mrs. James J. Frelk.

We are also grateful to the many individuals and institutions whose paintings are reproduced in this book. Their generosity—and the gracious cooperation of not a few—has made it possible for many others to enjoy them as well.

Carl Schmitt, Jr., *President*

The Carl Schmitt Foundation

Carl Schmitt—A Biographical Sketch

My philosophy may be summed up thus:
First, to receive from God gratefully everything possible that I can get.
Second, to give back to God through my neighbor everything which I can give.
To give gifts to my neighbor I must use art, because a gift must be made—
hence I must be an artist.

—Carl Schmitt, 1933

Early years and education

"I've been an artist ever since I could see," Carl Schmitt recalled in his last years. Schmitt showed early promise as a boy in Warren, Ohio, where he was born on May 6, 1889. The son of an accomplished organist and professor of music, Jacob A. Schmitt, the young Carl received ready encouragement to further his evident gifts and artistic interests. These found wider scope through his friendship with Zell Hart Deming, a prominent local businesswoman and patron of the arts. Recognizing the talent of this spirited teenager, she encouraged his ambitions, and with her financial help, Schmitt left Warren at age seventeen to begin formal studies in New York.

Schmitt first attended the Chase School, where William Merritt Chase was still giving classes and Robert Henri was the dominant figure. The following year, he was admitted to the National Academy of Design to study under Emil Carlsen. Schmitt excelled at the Academy, winning a best picture award each year he was there. He had great respect for Carlsen and kept for the rest of his life several pages of quotations from his class. When Carlsen offered to teach him privately after graduation, however, Schmitt declined, determined to be his own man in art.

Upon leaving the Academy, Schmitt began painting in New York and then in Ohio, where he received a number of commissions.

OPPOSITE: Carl Schmitt, c. 1920

Carl Schmitt, c.1900

Under the sponsorship of Mrs. Deming, he spent the year 1914 in Florence, studying at the Academy of Fine Arts. There he immersed himself in the rich artistic heritage of Italy, discovering Michelangelo, Dante, and the Italian countryside and spirit, from which he began to derive his personal aesthetics—an aesthetics that drove him throughout his life.

By 1916, Schmitt had set up a studio in New York, writing, "I want to paint a canvas . . . that will be nothing but harmonious tone." Joining him was a friend from Ohio, Zell Hart Deming's nephew, Hart Crane. The celebrated American poet, still an aspiring writer at the time, was taken with Schmitt's generous affability and stimulating conversation. Ten years younger than Schmitt, he readily absorbed what Schmitt offered regarding the elements of his craft. "Nearly every evening since my advent has been spent in the companionship of Carl," Crane wrote to his father. "Last night . . . we talked until twelve, or after, behind our pipes. He has some splendid ideas."

The qualities appreciated by Crane would also help Schmitt foster friendships with the poet Conrad Aiken, writers Padraic and Molly Colum, photographer Alfred Stieglitz, and the documentary

Carl Schmitt (*right*) with his mother Grace and older brother Robert, c.1905

movie pioneer Robert Flaherty, among many others. With them Schmitt expounded and clarified his theories of the arts, often with wit and humor. His profound insights, summarized in essays scattered throughout his notebooks, powered both his life and work.

Carl and Gertrude at Silvermine, c.1920

Silvermine and growing recognition

Within a few years, however, Schmitt developed a desire for a quieter life where he could paint and think in peace. At the urging of an Ohio artist friend, Addison T. Millar, he headed to Silvermine, Connecticut, a bucolic hamlet an hour's train ride from New York. At Millar's invitation, he began to attend meetings of the "Knocker's Club," an informal group of Silvermine artists under the leadership of sculptor Solon Borglum. Members of the group "knocked" each other's work and mounted an annual exhibition at Borglum's studio. Schmitt was so taken with the place that he bought an acre of land across the road from Borglum and settled there shortly after his marriage to Gertrude Lord, herself an accomplished pianist and daughter of prominent architect and fellow Knocker Austin W. Lord. Gertrude would prove a devoted wife and mother to their ten children, and an invaluable support to Carl in his artistic endeavors.

Schmitt at his new studio in Silvermine, 1919

Schmitt at Chartres Cathedral, 1927

The 1920s saw Schmitt's rising stature as an artist. Upon Borglum's death in 1922, he helped found the Silvermine Guild of Artists and served on its board for a number of years. Through the 1920s and into the 1930s, Schmitt's work was accepted at major national exhibitions in New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, including twelve consecutive appearances at the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh. He received widespread critical acclaim and was honored with inclusion in the celebrated Century of Progress Exhibition at the Chicago World's Fair of 1933 and the First National Exhibition of American Art at Rockefeller Center in 1936.

"Do only what you love"

Still, Schmitt struggled both to realize his artistic vision and to provide for his family. In a remarkable journal entry from the mid-1920s, he noted poignantly: "Work does not go well at all while I am worried over poverty. I have no money and don't know where we shall or when we shall get some. Society does not owe the artist a living because the artist's product is without economic value. However, it is unfortunate that I can barely exist. So I take little doses of virtue as a duty and spend the greater part of my time in the contemplation of beauty. Sancta Rita, ora pro nobis!"

Schmitt longed for a life "concerned with beauty first," to live out his own admonition: "Do only what you love." "The perfect attitude for the artist," he wrote in 1922, "is the continual companionship of God and unceasing toil. To dream of Eden before the Fall: to work in the world by the sweat of his brow." Again he was drawn to Europe. In 1927 Schmitt's wife and family joined him for a years' stay in Chartres, where he studied its glorious cathedral and worked in its shadow.

A severe bout of tuberculosis came on in the mid-1930s. At the urging of his doctor and through the generosity of friends, he entered a sanatorium in the Italian Alps. It was a trying time for him and the family, forcing even the sale of his studio. Gertrude and their ten children joined him six months later. For Schmitt, Italy was the center of all Western civilization and culture. Devoted to Western art and a great lover of Michelangelo, he intended, as he recovered, to continue living in Italy. But with the advent of war in Europe, Carl Schmitt's dream of permanently residing in Italy proved to be short lived.

Carl, Gertrude, and family in the mid-1940s. Four sons not pictured were serving in World War II.

"A present of this day, this hour"

On their return to Silvermine in 1939, Schmitt and his wife built a new home on land given to them by Gertrude's father. There they remained for the rest of their lives, Schmitt now painting in a studio that his sons had built for him in 1950 behind the house. He preferred to work quietly, exhibiting only in local shows or by special invitation. He did not see his seclusion in negative terms, however, writing in 1962: "My personal attitude of isolation is caused by a daily, in fact a continuous, awareness that my maker is making me a present of this day, of this hour." As he had written earlier that same year: "All creation in the Fine Arts is done in privacy and in love."

Friends characterize Carl Schmitt as a man truly respectful of the individual person. Despite the poverty and troubles that sometimes seemed to overwhelm him, he treated people amiably and with humor. Schmitt's intensely strong beliefs, great wit, and profound ideas never closed him off from contemporaries whose views often differed greatly from his own. He was genuinely a man in pursuit of the truth of art and life. Thus, he continued to paint and write in relative isolation for nearly fifty years, stopping only a few months before his death at the age of 100 on October 25, 1989.

The Thought of Carl Schmitt

I shall attempt to write some brief suggestions of my main beliefs in art. If they seem vague, I can plead that the artist is filled with the desire to express through vision alone. When he speaks it is with the good (though perhaps unfortunate) intention of bridging, however inadequately, the gap which exists between the aesthetic and rationalistic extremes. When he speaks he is painfully aware of the strangeness of his medium and that his muse is displeased at the digression.

—Carl Schmitt, opening of the essay
"Some Brief Thoughts of My Main Beliefs in Art," 1922

Carl Schmitt recorded his thoughts in a series of studio notebooks that he kept continuously for almost forty years, from the early 1920s to the mid-1960s. His reflections cover the technique of painting, art and aesthetics, religion, politics, history, and even current events. Most are short *dicta* that present what he himself called "dogmatic" statements—conclusions, as it were, seemingly without argument or premises. As he himself notes in his typically wry fashion: "Dogmatic—hence clear—hence errors may be the more easily spotted." In fact, most of the sayings are not self-contained ideas: the "arguments" for them are to be grasped from an understanding of the entire range of his thought.

The "triune thesis"

In one of his first notebooks, Schmitt laid out the idea that was to permeate every facet of his thinking. First given coherent expression in the "Essay on Wind" of 1925, his "triune thesis" sees three "realities of the imagination": the lyric, the epic, and the dramatic. The lyric is the first encounter with reality—the perception of a child who sees the world bathed in light. In art, this is expressed in "flat"

OPPOSITE: *Madonna with Black Head-dress (Dalmatian Mother)*, detail

designs, permeated with light and free of shadows. As the child grows into adulthood, shadows and conflicts appear: he must reconcile himself to things outside of himself that challenge his first innocence. One can see this "epic" stage in paintings where the light comes from without, casting shadows and nuance upon the objects depicted. Finally, the tensions of the epic give way to an integration of the first two stages in the "dramatic" plane. Here the light seems to come from *within* the persons and objects in the painting. At the same time, the dark "voids" provide an image of the price paid for this integration. The artist and the art he creates have reached full maturity.

Schmitt likened the three stages to a journey into a city. One's first glimpse of the city is like an illusion, a mirage, more a memory than an actual encounter. This is the lyric. "Now the epic is the lyric sustained until the mirage (that first memory of reality) has faded and is gradually replaced by a clear vision of the City, itself standing steady in the distance, an *appearance* replacing a mirage." Still, one has yet to enter the city itself; the journey has been one of feeling and seeing rather than firsthand knowledge. This final stage is the culmination, the goal of the journey. "Without losing memory, the mirage, the illusion, [the major poet] grasps the tangible in three planes . . . . He has added the intellectual imagination to the emotional and has descended into the City." In tracing this "journey," Schmitt was actually providing a clear picture of his own path to greatness as an artist: the "major poet" of the essay was the artist Schmitt himself was determined to become.

Schmitt had been thinking along these lines for a number of years, but his "Essay on Wind" would prove a seminal essay, guiding his every aesthetic thought and artistic endeavor, forming the background of virtually every entry in his notebooks, from technical charts of colors to the most speculative theological meditations. The thesis lent an astonishing durability to his thought: ideas pondered in the 1920s and 30s are taken up ten or twenty years later with remarkable consistency. Certain themes stand out in his aesthetic reflections over many years: vision, the fine arts as symbols, form, the aims and personality of the artist, art and religion, beauty. Schmitt's development of his triune thesis eventually branched out from purely aesthetic considerations to encompass the whole range of human reflection and experience, grasping even at the supernatural realities of grace and the triune God.

Schmitt's thought in the 1930s and 1940s

During the 1930s, as Schmitt's thought turned to social and political questions, the focus on the triune thesis seems to fade. It can be discerned, however, at the basis of his convictions on the role of the individual vis-à-vis the state, the crucial role of the family, and the priority of personal "substance" over all forms of social "expediency." A closer look at the notes from this period reveals an application of his thesis in a sophisticated way to subjects outside the strictly aesthetic realm.

In the difficult war years, Schmitt's notes concentrate on the role of the person, in particular the artist, in the contemporary world. This was not a new concern for him, as he had written decisively in the early 1930s: "Only the mature *individual* can redeem our culture." Now, however, his ideas reach a new depth, focusing on the place of suffering in the molding of the mature person. "True Form cannot be rediscovered *except by means of destruction*. There is absolutely no Form (in the purest sense of the word) possible unless it is discovered

Carl Schmitt, 1960

by sacrifice and death," he wrote in 1943. This echoes what he had written more than a decade earlier during another challenging period in his life: "The major artist is simply one who lives in death."

From these years also would come Schmitt's only book-length effort, *Europe and the Arts*. "The fine arts," he wrote, "have been chosen for direct consideration, rather than the spiritual life or the politics of Europe, because they are a kind of index of all other activities. In fact, there exists no better barometer of the spiritual life of a people than their arts." Each European nation serves as a "guardian" of one of the seven fine arts—Sculpture, Architecture, Painting, Music, Poetry, Dance, and Drama—based on that country's artistic milieu, which includes geography, climate, temperament of the people, and their religious heritage. This is quintessential Schmitt. It would remain unfinished and, with the exception of a short excerpt, unpublished.

A marvelous synthesis

Schmitt's writing from the 1950s reveals a marvelous synthesis of his previous thought. On the one hand we find the artist preoccupied with the technique of painting, striving mightily to bring together his earlier efforts at perfecting the sequence of colors and layers of a painting. On the other hand his reformulations of the original triune thesis unlock its full symbolic significance. Such ideas can be found (albeit in a less developed form) even in the 1920s, attesting to the powerful consistency of his thinking. Perhaps the most beautiful summation of his thought can be found in an entry from 1961: "The Lyric, Epic, and Dramatic vision . . . of the material imagination is entirely symbolic: it is the symbol of the spiritual or Divine vision."

Although he had almost twenty-five years of fruitful artistic work ahead of him, Schmitt would write little after the mid-1960s. Perhaps he felt what he had to say in the literal sense had already been put down; the rest he left to his art. As he wrote on the opening page of one of his earliest notebooks: "If I did not conceive of these notes as *tentative* in their nature, I would not have made them. The permanent truths of which I am already certain, I need not record. I cannot forget the latter, I cannot remember the former. All the good of my notes I remember whether I will or no. The rest is forgotten" (1924).

There are two ways in which any work of art is accomplished.
The first is to start the ritual and keep at it
until some kind of vision ensues.
What that vision is depends upon our capacity
and upon the grace of the gods.
The second way is the way of our rare genius.
It is transcendental.
The artist in this case is filled with the vision
which bursts through the medium from above down.
The vision of beauty is so various,
and the approaches to that vision are so various,
that I am ill content to limit myself to one
vision and one approach.

The artist is concerned not with *sight* but with *vision*.

Two Oranges
Oil and wax on hardboard, c. 1953
15 x 18 in. (38.1 x 45.7 cm)
Private collection

ROSARIO

Vision is the central "sight" of the pure, or contemplative, imagination.

It draws the expressive or time-elements of
melody, rhythm, character, and idea within itself
where they become timeless and are transfigured.

One Black Bottle and Garlics
Oil on hardboard, c. 1975
14¾ x 18 in. (37.5 x 45.7 cm)
Private collection

Painting is fundamentally the art of Vision in *Light*.

Blue Madonna
Oil on canvas, c. 1950
24 x 20 in. (61 x 50.8 cm)
The Carl Schmitt Foundation

The union of the finely imaginative eye or vision
with the superficial or sensuous eye
is necessary in the making of a painting.

Peeled Orange
Oil on canvas
20 x 24 in. (50.8 x 61.0 cm)
The Carl Schmitt Foundation

Art has but one object:
to realize nature,
make it more vivid by means of a vivid Imagination.

Lanterman Falls
Oil on canvas, 1918
25 x 30 in. (63.5 x 76.2 cm)
The Butler Institute of American Art,
Youngstown, Ohio
Museum purchase, 1921

Imaginative vision is symbolic of spiritual vision.

The Sower
Oil on hardboard, c. 1937
24 x 19¾ in. (61 x 50.2 cm)
The Carl Schmitt Foundation

The Lyric, Epic, and Dramatic vision of the material imagination
is entirely symbolic:
it is the symbol of the spiritual or Divine vision.

Eclipse
Oil on canvas
23 x 19 in. (58.4 x 48.3 cm)
Private collection

The lyric essence is form *suggested*—form as light.

Stormy Day
Oil on canvas, c. 1915
15 x 18 in. (38.1 x 45.7 cm)
Courtesy of Vander Molen Fine Art,
Ponoma, California

The opening rhythm of the first life of the soul,
a mood, a thing of crescendos and of love:
fluid and yielding, of soft modulation, gently warm and full of light.

The unity of one.

Madonna with Black Head-dress (Dalmatian Mother)
Oil on canvas, 1926
24 x 20 in. (61 x 50.8 cm)
The Carl Schmitt Foundation

The epic essence is form in appearance—
form and *space*, light and *shade*.

Woman in Irish Coat
Oil on canvas, c. 1932
30 x 25 in. (76.2 x 63.5 cm)
Private collection

The rhythm measured and spacial,
steady, of clear vision, slow and processional,
central and objective, the cool rhythm of the horizontal and the vertical.

The unity of two.

Café Cetinje
Oil on canvas, c. 1931
30 x 25 in. (76.2 x 63.5 cm)
The Carl Schmitt Foundation

The rhythm dramatic,
the harmony of opposition, the balance of three.
With crystal air and feather edge, the tonic of the soul:
the mind has entered.

Black Bottle and Two Eggs
Oil on hardboard, c. 1935
25 x 15 in. (63.5 x 30.5 cm)
Private collection

The third stage is the lyricism sustained into form tangible, poignant, climactic.

Deposition
Oil on canvas, 1933
30 x 24 in. (76.2 x 61 cm)
Private collection

I can conceive of no painting considered as fine art
which does not rely upon the beauty of light upon form.

Still Life
Oil on canvas, c. 1973
20 x 24 in. (50.8 x 61 cm)
Private collection

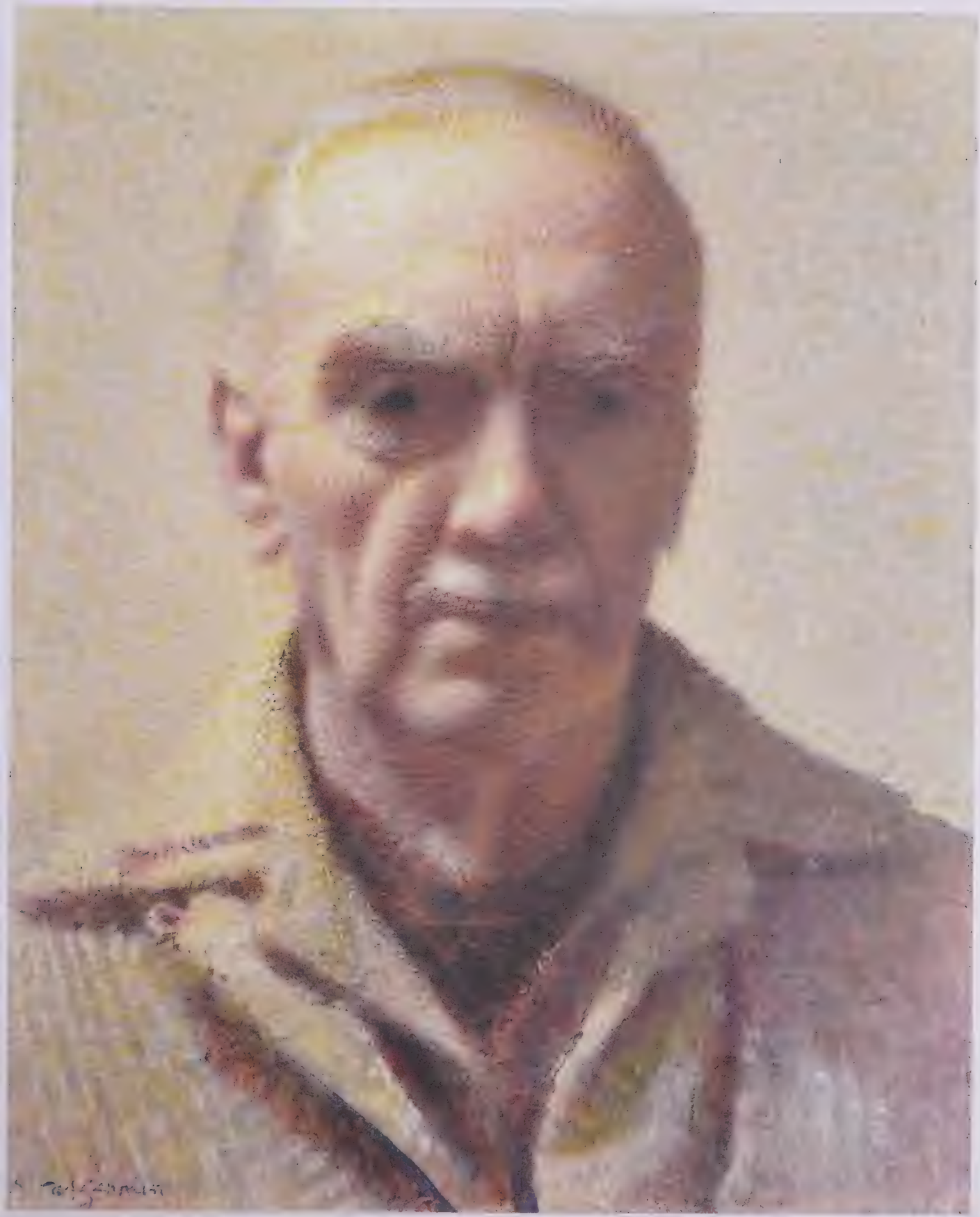
Form is made in painting by means of color.

Eggs and Copper
Oil on hardboard
12 x 15 in. (30.5 x 38.1 cm)
Private collection

True Form cannot be rediscovered except by means of destruction. There is absolutely no Form (in the purest sense of the word) possible unless it is discovered by sacrifice and death.

The major artist is simply one who lives in death.

Self-Portrait
Oil on hardboard, c. 1965
15 x 12 in. (45.7 x 38.1 cm)
Private collection



Reality is the keynote to life and art.

To be aware of reality—to be awake, is to be alive.

Austin with Cello
Oil on canvas, 1931
48 x 42 in. (122 x 106.7 cm)
Private collection

If one is intensely alive spiritually he will eventually react into beauty.

Rose Drapes
Oil on canvas, 1956
30 x 25 in. (76.2 x 63.5 cm)
Private collection

The realm of being is far more complex and *wonderful*
than the hints so far given by the poetic and prose artists and artisans.

Only the painter the architect and the sculptor can deal with it.

Silver Necklace
Oil on canvas, c. 1950
15 x 18 in. (38.1 x 45.7 cm)
Private collection

When I paint I have only one aim:
to give substance, essence to things.

Glass Platter
Oil on canvas
25 x 30¼ in. (63.5 x 76.8 cm)
Private collection

The painter's business is to reveal but one thing: volume, mass, and substance, not to the exclusion of appearance but as a fulfillment of appearance—in short, to bear witness to the mystery—the miracle—of substance.

Black Bottles
Oil on canvas, 1931
20 x 32 in. (50.8 x 81.3 cm)
The Carl Schmitt Foundation

A work of art is mature—complete—when it lives and appears real.

Bottles on their Sides
Oil on canvas
25 x 30 in. (63.5 x 76.2 cm)
Private collection

The aim of art, its primary aim, is Beauty.

Blue Bowl
Oil on canvas
23 x 19 in. (58.5 x 48.3 cm)
Private collection

Art is concerned with beauty first
and not with the world of good and evil or usefulness and uselessness.

Beauty is neither one nor the other.

Still Life
Oil on hardboard, 1942
20 x 24 in. (50.8 x 61 cm)
Private collection

One great poem or symphony or painting or sculpture
or building or drama or dance composition
is worth infinitely more than a true artist's attempt to right the world.

Pumpkin with Iron Pot
Oil on canvas, c. 1914
20 x 20 in. (50.8 x 50.8 cm)
The Florence Griswold Museum,
Old Lyme, Connecticut
Gift of the Hartford Steam Boiler
Inspection & Insurance Co.

The most perfect beauty is a perfect balance between activity and quietude.

Salt Cellar, Cloth, and Bowl
Oil on canvas, c. 1980
10 x 12 in. (25.4 x 30.5 cm)
Private collection

I am sure that when beauty tears at the heart of a man
he can do nothing to contain it.

Gertrude (the artist's wife)
Oil on canvas, c. 1918
36 x 30 in. (91.4 x 76.2 cm)
Private collection

The appreciation and creation of beauty cannot be stopped, once spirituality is experienced.

Beauty is a necessity to deep religious experience.

Nativity
Oil on canvas, c. 1926
30 x 25 in. (76.2 x 63.5 cm)
The Carl Schmitt Foundation

To receive is the art of religion—mysticism.

To give is the art of Beauty—the Fine Arts.

St. Katharine
Oil on canvas, 1922
30 x 25 in. (76.2 x 63.5 cm)
Private collection

The Fine Arts serve to recall us to the fact that
mystical religion is the vital force most deeply imbedded in man,
from which springs all his notable activity.

Resurrection
Oil on hardboard, 1941
24 x 20 in. (61 x 50.8 cm)
Private collection

Man cannot long remain interested in things only.
When he searches for greater happiness,
he searches for the reality behind things—he finds God.

When he finds God he is said to be mystical because he has found a Mystery,
the essence of happiness,
a Triunity, the Trinity.

Immanent Trinity Decoration
Oil on canvas, 1924
48 x 40 in. (121.9 x 101.6 cm)
The Novitiate of St. Isaac Jogues,
Wernersville, Pennsylvania

When man finds the Reality of the universe,
he suddenly sees all things—the natural order, creation—as symbols.

And when he sees symbols he is a "creator," or artist.

Self-Portrait
Oil on canvas, c. 1965
30 x 24 in. (76.2 x 61 cm)
Private collection

When man has experienced Primary Reality,
he reacts in art, a parallel.

He reveals in any of the arts an exact record,
a symbolic story of that Prime Experience.

St. Francis and the Unicorn
Oil on canvas, 1932
29¾ x 25¼ in. (75.6 x 64.1 cm)
The Carl Schmitt Foundation

The object of art, the Fine Arts,
is to reveal the meaning of appearances
in terms of symbols.

St. Paul the Hermit (Purity and Poverty)
Oil on canvas, 1921
29 x 25 in. (75.6 x 63.5 cm)
The Carl Schmitt Foundation

The Fine Arts are based upon the fact that
every creature is a symbol of the Absolute and is Triune.

Bread, Wine, and Knife
Oil on hardboard, 1989
12 x 14¾ in. (30.5 x 37.5 cm)
Private collection

The Vision of the Holy Trinity,
the intuition of this unity,
is the nourishment of all life
and consequently of the Fine Arts.

Coronation of the Virgin
Oil on canvas, c. 1924
42 x 35 in. (106.7 x 88.9 cm)
Private collection

This morning I experienced one of those intangibles
which make one an unconscious unity with that art in which he has matured—
The pungent, washed, fresh smell after a night rain mixed
with the odor of the first leaves of autumn.

Rock in the Silvermine Woods
Pastel on paper, 1948
17½ x 14½ in. (44.5 x 36.8 cm)
Private collection

A person comes the nearest to being real of anything in the world.

Harold Hart Crane
Oil on metal supports, after 1917
17½ x 14½ in. (44.5 x 36.8 cm)
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution
Gift of the Carl Schmitt Foundation

When will we learn
that childhood is in a great sense not simply a preparation for adult life,
but a thing unique and complete in itself—
a masterpiece of God.

Peter
Oil on canvas, c. 1940
15 x 10 in. (38.1 x 25.4 cm)
Private collection

Only the mature individual can redeem our culture.

Gertrude in Roman Scarf
Oil on canvas, c. 1960
30¼ x 25¼ in. (76.8 x 64.1 cm)
Private collection

The future does not lie with society,
but with the family and the person.

Christopher
Oil on canvas, c. 1950
18 x 15 in. (45.7 x 38.1 cm)
The Carl Schmitt Foundation

The joys of this world are for those who can see.

Still Life
Oil on panel, 1914
16 x 16 in. (40.6 x 40.6 cm)
The Carl Schmitt Foundation

Ritual: The Gate, or On Having Nothing on One's Mind (1925)

Have you ever noticed how many essays begin with a beautiful ritual? I mean with a nice rhythm and choice of words—but with no content. I do not criticize this. I applaud it as something quite fitting. For *no* artist has always begun work full of the Spirit. (And no *artist* can continue to the end without some stirring of the imagination.) He sits down, the artist, in most cases with nothing on his mind. He goes ahead with the ritual of his art, and if the gods are good to him that day, they will recognize that the ritual is their own proper cloak, waiting, and will come and inform it.

There are two ways in which any work of art is accomplished (to pursue this thought of ritual and content): the first and the commonest, as I have said, is to start the ritual *and keep at it* until the gods relieve the man. The Church, of course, knows this and prescribes ritual, rhythm for the eye and ear and even touch (in the rosary)—constant repetition with desire will ultimately stir the imagination which is a step to the soul. Or if you choose incantation, the chant or a rhythm to the eye will gradually hypnotize, producing in some way that balance between consciousness and unconsciousness which is necessary to imaginative life and "creation." As I write, repeating phrase after phrase, watching the pen build letter after letter and word after word, our imagination ultimately responds to the rhythm and some kind of vision ensues. What that vision is depends upon our capacity and upon the grace of the gods.

The second way is the way of our rare genius. It is transcendental and a reversal of the first immanent way I have just suggested. The artist in this case is filled with the vision which bursts through the medium from above down. He seems to have a divine disregard for set form and his ritual seems to come incidentally. These men make new canons because they speak with authority. Their clothing is a bare necessity and is secondary. The message and personality of the man are all-important. (But even these men once began with ritual.)

OPPOSITE: *Rose Drapes*, detail

The object of ritual is to invite energy, to make of ourselves an instrument. We revolve the engine to start it. And as it goes it gathers momentum until it seems to go by itself. The bird flaps before it flies, the baby mimics. We go through the motions before we do the *thing*. The artist draws to draw. The writer writes words before visions. The drinker drinks for thirst until he thirsts for drink. The reader reads before he understands. One must start the engine.

But this energy which all crave, what is its nature and why is man only happy when he receives and uses it? I think this energy is the base of everything. We can analyze its manifestations, and this detail concerns the natural scientist. We can think creatively about it, and this concerns the philosopher. We can crave and love it, and this concerns the mystic. We can accept it when it comes and use it to its fullest, and this concerns the man who is All Alive, the Artist.

The mystery (like every symbol of The Mystery) is triune and cannot be explained by man or apprehended by man. He sees it and believes or he does not. If he has seen it, he can make a poor kind of suggestion of it which will be recognized by others who have seen it, but which will be Greek to those who have not seen it.

It is possible, however, to suggest how this happiness may be obtained. On the side of "life" many books have been written telling people how it may be done. On the side of art there seems to be silence and I suppose rightly. For this reason: Art is a reaction from "life." If in life one apprehends, loves, and enjoys Reality, in art one will play with the symbols naturally. The artist will not in that case mistake natural phenomena for Reality Itself, but will instinctively recognize all phenomena as *symbol* of Reality. Our great art (the early Egyptian, ancient Greek, and Gothic European) is symbolic because it is the play of men who were alive to Reality, who were *true mystics*. Art is a reaction from Religion, but one must have Religion to react from. Great art is an exact barometer and contemporary of religion—not religion as the popular historians record it, an exterior thing, the machine, the corporate thing alone, nor as the Puritan records it, the "inner light" alone, an individual disease, but mysticism: the just balance between interior individual communion with God and corporate life in God.

Whenever in the past we have had mystical life and corporate life existing one in the other, a unity with stress laid upon the mystical (that is, Religion), there we have had art. Where there is Life, *there* is art. Where there is true religion, art cannot be stopped. Where there is no true religion, art cannot be encouraged by a million uplifters.

The Critic (1943)

The time will probably come, or we hope it will, when the critic and the artist are considered as one. Of all the wearisome clichés, the one that is most distressing is, "We are always glad to hear *constructive* criticism." Or, "You are always criticizing; have you nothing constructive to offer? " It is, of course, true that destruction for its own sake is insane. No one in his right mind engages in that. But it must be recalled to mind, especially today when Form is almost unknown (Form in its metaphysical—Form in its aesthetic sense), that true Form cannot be rediscovered *except by mean of destruction*. There is absolutely no Form (in the purest sense of the word) possible unless it is discovered by sacrifice and death. In sculpture this is so obvious that one would think that the symbolism of Redemption would escape no one—a lump of stone, a chisel, and a hammer (in the hands of a critic). Those are the materials necessary for creation.

And speaking of critics, I could wish that Michelangelo were thought of as such. It seems to me that all the works of this supreme master are beautiful simply because they are critical. It is also interesting to note how criticism is one with personality, and it seems to me that Michelangelo bears this out.

For example, take the famous *Pieta* in St. Peter's Church at Rome. Many people will tell you that it is a bad array of statuary. Especially vociferous are the contemporary sculptors who say that the forms are not simple enough: that the feelings are dissipated in drapery. There is a great deal to be said for this objection; certainly it fails to meet the strict demand which makes the *Deposition* at Florence so powerful. But in spite of its failures, what remains? Something intangible which lives in every atom of the marble: the personality of the master. For personality is the result of honest self-criticism. We feel that Michelangelo had already laid the chisel to his own soul before attacking the marble, but that being young, he had not cut so deeply as to reveal the soul, naked, as he was to do as an old man. However, except for some little concealment behind the voluminous folds of Mary's robe, his personality does show forth, although at this stage in his development his experience in cutting stone was possibly still behind his self-discipline. In any event, the personality shines in spite of any lack of organization of form, because personality is the potential of form.

On the other hand, when considering the other arts, one wonders whether the critic and the artist do not tend to be separated by the nature of the art. In a work of literature, where form is the object as in Dante's great poem, there can be no question that here the critic

and the artist are happily cooperating. But as in all literature, words must be made to succeed each other in lyrical beauty before they can be pruned, and usually they will stand little pruning once they flow from the inspired spring (sacred well). So true is this, that it is difficult, for me at least, to think that that greatest of lyric Romanticists, Shakespeare, had a severely formal critical sense, and I would doubt if the three arts of Painting, Music, and Literature, in their pure sense, could be achieved at all, if the critical faculty were stronger than the lyrical instinct. From this it will be seen that I do not consider Dante as the maker of "pure" Literature. To me, his work is great because of his personality and because of its almost sculptured form; John Keats, however, was more of a pure poet. No, the critic can only be the full artist when he works on material already at hand "in the lump." With this raw material already provided, he either disciplines it (the human body: the Dance, the Drama) or destroys material superfluities (the marble: Sculpture).

In these three arts we would seem to recognize the ascendancy of the critical faculty as the necessary act of creation, and it will be seen that I would limit the critical faculty to pure destruction, albeit inspired destruction: dynamic.

And / Or (1943)

I read a phrase yesterday which started me thinking. This morning I have decided that our decadence causes certain symptoms and that the symptoms aggravate the disease. The phrase was: "We need a religion of life instead of one of definitions."

Now anyone would have thought that a normal man in possession of his faculties could accommodate both "life" and "definitions" in his religion—but no, it is our symptom today that we must have one extreme theory "instead" of another extreme theory. Today the world must either be run by Masculinists or Feminists; we must teach by rote and formulae in our schools or take the only other alternative: abolish all learning by heart and "induce" the child gradually into the light of understanding. Although we probably would do both things naturally, we must not. Nothing will satisfy today but doing exclusively one or the other—or rather fighting over the theory.

In art, we must be amorphous expressionists or academic and admire Raphael. It is outside the question that Greco admired and even imitated Raphael—no attempt at rapprochement between Greco and Raphael must be allowed. We must either "take vitamins" or perish without them. Anyone who eats for the fun of it as did his forefathers for forty million years is not exclusive enough to be really

intelligent. We must have sweetness and light or else bitterness and darkness; we must have freedom from everything or abolish authority and slavery; a completely mechanized and efficient man or a backward and superstitious moron.

Is it just the American mind which is so direct and simple, or has this sort of simplicity eaten up the whole world?

When our fellow men are so immersed in means that they can admit of nothing but the exclusion of ends and origins—when "truth" is pursued at the complete exclusion of beauty and goodness, and when wealth alone is valid to the exclusion of all else, it would seem that only catastrophe would bring man to his senses. For, only the humiliated and impoverished man is capable of those inclusions which make him once more human. Only the proud and wealthy may so easily choose and exclude: choose so many of the wrong things and exclude so much of the good.

What we need today is a religion of life *and* a religion of definitions. One that is very lively *and* very definite.

By virtue of the Dear God Which is within me,

I will to master my body in its every function.

As much as I master my body, so much will my God master me.

And I am happy only in this servitude.

My labor is in mastery,

My refreshment in servitude.

Without mastery, I am without servitude.

Without servitude:

I am a coward, hopeless, without joy,

Restless, without the peace of faith,

Sorrowful, without happiness.

With mastery, by virtue of my God within me,

I am a slave to my God above.

My slavery opens my soul at the top,

Admitting my Infinite God as a sharp wedge driven through ice.

—August 31, 1927

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The splendor of the paintings in this book—their poise and serenity, their radiant color, their sheer "realness"—is a testament to a life devoted to capturing the beauty of things.

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